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March 29, 1961

MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
March 9, 1961 -- 3:30 PM

Others present: Vice President Johnson
Secretary McNamara
General Lemnitzer
Asst. Secretary of Defense Nitze
Admiral Harry Felt (CINCPAC)
Brig. General Boyle
Colonel Wood
Asst. Secretary of State McGhee
Mr. Stueves
Mr. Gleeck
Mr. Dulles
Mr. Bissell
Mr. FitzGerald
Mr. Bundy
Mr. Reston
General Clifton

Secretary McNamara opened the meeting with an outline presentation. For discussion, they presented a concept and plan for the military actions concerning the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ). Copies of the plan were distributed. The four White House copies were returned to General Lemnitzer.

General Lemnitzer read the first part of the plan and then Admiral Felt was asked to comment.

Admiral Felt said that their plan had three objectives: (1) to fragment and split the guerrillas; (2) to fragment and split the Pathet Lao from support which is coming from North Vietnam, and (3) to destroy the Pathet Lao forces.

Admiral Felt stated that there were three or four significant dates he would like to point out.

In September, 1958, Ambassador Smith in Laos reported that it was a bad situation. Smith felt that we had a poor type of personnel in the area, and our program needed the Army's

No additional material released
as a result of this review.

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best man. Up to that time they had been largely retired officers who were not knowledgeable or aggressive.

A second significant date was when the Army produced the man, Brigadier General Heintges. In November 1958, they evolved the Heintges plan, which fundamentally was to teach the Laotians to shoot and salute.

Then in February 1959, after the preliminary planning, General Heintges was placed in command of our effort, as Chief of the PEO.

In August 1959, the Communists intervened in North and North-east Laos. (Admiral Felt presented a map of the Communist intervention in the fall of 1959.)

The President asked what political event accompanied the Communist intervention. What really was the key to that intervention?

Admiral Felt: I believe it was the success of the Heintges plan. The Communists saw the Royal Laotian Government getting control of its people.

President: What was the objective of the Heintges plan -- political or military?

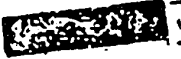
Admiral Felt: The objective was fundamentally to train a Laotian Army. France -- which is really charged with the training of the Laotians -- had not actually trained them well. Our efforts were circumscribed and limited to giving the Laotians the equipment in good shape and giving them some technical training on the use of the equipment.

President: What had been the progress up to that time?

Admiral Felt: We have to go back a little way, but since 1954 the U.S. had furnished economic and military aid under a pentilateral agreement (and we are still operating under that agreement).

Admiral Felt pointed out that the PEO was really not a MAAG. It was only to receive equipment and to give it to the Laotians. The efforts were limited by the French, and in some instances, by the Ambassador.

The President asked when the Heintges plan went into effect and if it is still in effect. Admiral Felt said that the plan has been working ever since its initiation, and since its inception, the Communists


have never stopped trying to infiltrate Laos. In the Phui government there were no Communists, and this has continually frustrated the Communists.

Admiral Felt said the next significant date was August 1960, the time of the Kong Le coup. Phoumi wanted a counter-coup, but got no support for this effort.

On December 3, 1960, the Soviet airlift began, with eight Soviet pilots and eight Soviet navigators on the planes bringing in oil, howitzers, guns, and much other equipment. It was quite apparent that Phoumi now needed heavier equipment than we had been supplying.

In response to the President's question, they estimated that the Soviets have flown 2000 sorties into the area and have brought in 2400 tons by air and about 1000 tons by truck.

The President's questions developed the point that the U.S. has sent in much more tonnage since December 3 than the Soviets have.

Admiral Felt then presented a new map of the current situation and brought out the following points. The PDJ controls the communications network, the main roads. The Laotian roads are really not much. Highways 7 and 13 are the main thoroughfares across and in the interior of the country. The Sam Neua road, another important one, is being repaired and built up to being a major supply line. Admiral Felt pointed out that we have pinpointed their supply dumps, we have good knowledge of the airfield at PDJ, and we know where Kong Le's command post is. The blue dots on the map showed where the Meo tribesmen are all spread out. He said that they can be developed more extensively.

The President asked Admiral Felt how long it had been since he had been to Laos. The Admiral replied that he had visited Laos two years ago and that he had repeatedly requested permission to go back, but the Ambassador had asked him not to come. Admiral Felt pointed out that his Chief of Staff has been there and several other officers have visited, but the Ambassador did not want such senior representation in the area.

In response to further questioning, Admiral Felt said that the U.S. has unilateral plans for intervention if we are called upon and that he has a task force organized and a commander designated (this is Lieut. General Paul D. Harkins who is on Admiral Felt's staff and who, at the present time, is visiting Laos).

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General Lemnitzer then introduced Brigadier General Boyle, who is stationed in Vientiane as Chief of the PEO, in civilian guise, and Colonel Wood, who is stationed at Souvannakhet. Both are advisers to Phoumi. The President asked how many French military are in the country now. Colonel Wood replied that there are 1000 French at Seno, but that they are just garrison troops, and that he estimates the French Army has about 150 "trainers" scattered all over the area. General Boyle said that the French have not been closely associated with the fighting elements of the Laotian Army since the Kong Le coup in August 1960.

In further response to Presidential questions, General Boyle said that the French have really not talked to the U.S. representatives since August 1960. He said that the Thais accuse the French of wanting to see the pro-Western mission fail so that they can move in and pick up the pieces with an "I-told-you-so" attitude.

The President then asked about the French attitude, and General Boyle reiterated that the French are standing off but that Phoumi has been to France.

Mr. Steeves of State Department said that ten days ago, in a talk with the French urging them to be friendly and to let bygones be bygones and to tolerate the present government, the French attitude was that "we won't have a thing to do with them." The French want to let this government fall (the Boun Oum/Phoumi government). The French are extremely jealous and they have no real relations with the present government, according to Mr. Steeves.

The President then directed that the group send someone to Boston to brief General Gavin on our views of this situation before he goes to France. Admiral Felt feels that De Gaulle is hoping that with our failure the French can reestablish themselves in Southeast Asia through this Laotian operation. He pointed out that General Heintges got along very well with the French.

General Lemnitzer said that General Heintges is due in the Pentagon in the next two weeks. He is being assigned to the Army Staff.

The point was brought up that Ambassador Alphand says that we are wasting our time and that we can never recover the ground we have

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lost. It was brought out that the French and the British have practically the same view in these matters. Mr. Dulles made the point that France really wants us to fail.

At this point, they reverted to a further reading of the plan. When it was completed, the following questions went around the table:

The President asked what political actions we are now taking. The State Department representatives made the point that our political activities are not yet a failure; they would like to postpone any further steps until they see the results of Ambassador Thompson's talks with Khrushchev and the results of Phoumi's talk with Souvanna Phouma. In an ensuing discussion, the State Department people pointed out that Alexis Johnson was not being sent to talk to Souvanna because he was "too powerful" in view of the fact that he was going to soon be assigned here in the Department. They mentioned that Trimble had already talked to Souvanna, that Ambassador Brown and Souvanna have a good relationship, but Brown did not want to go down and talk to Souvanna after Trimble talked to him (it was Brown's decision) because at present he is accredited to the Royal Laotian Government and really can't talk to a "rebel" without degradation of his present position with the Royal Laotian Government. He made the point that the King of Laos would welcome Souvanna to confer with him, but Souvanna has lately been disparaging the King, his government and his attitude.

The President asked what offers Phoumi might make to Souvanna. Would he visit Souvanna to make his own propositions; would he be assured of safe passage and security? State indicated that Phoumi would offer Souvanna the Vice Premiership in a broadened government.

The President asked three questions: Would the Prime Minister accept this arrangement; do we like the arrangement; and should we let the Communists into the government?

There was a discussion that Souvanna is a little naive and not very well informed, and that after the Kong Le coup, he had willingly let the Russians come in. Trimble had reported that Souvanna felt that the West can't win by arms and that the neutrality of Laos is essential.

The President asked what the hope is of success by a tripartite commission. State said there was some hope in this, but that the Prince is afraid of opposition in a small commission.

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The President asked what the U.S. attitude is toward an ICC, and if it would work. State answered that the ICC package could be acceptable and then could be followed by calling together a 14-nation conference. If it included the Indians and the Canadians, it would be pretty good, but we would have to worry about the Poles being added.

The President then asked who the 14 nations are. State answered that they are Laos, Russia, UK, France, Communist China, North Vietnam, Cambodia, South Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, India, Canada, Poland and the U.S.

The President remarked that it looked like all were in favor of Souvanna except us, and perhaps Thailand and South Vietnam, and that this did not look like a very good lineup. He also said that perhaps the first item on the agenda with this lineup would be to cuss out the U.S.

The President asked for a discussion of Souvanna's trip to Western Europe and what his political plans were.

In the ensuing discussion, the following points developed. First, State said we must have a point at which we will not back off and the President must fix such a point. Second, the President said it was a basic problem to us that all the countries who are supposedly our allies favor the same person (Souvanna), as the Communists do. The third point State made was that the Laotians prefer peace and even a communized Laos to continuing the fight right now.

The President asked what our political plan is if the military action that we are discussing is successful. State responded that if the PDJ plan is successful, and if it were to trigger a peace seeking by the Communist side, we would then hope to continue about where we were in the Geneva Accord. This did not seem to be a very satisfactory reply because, as the President pointed out, as a political objective, it was limited and did leave us open to continued torture in this situation.

The President indicated several points. We could run supplies in U.S. planes as long as they were marked CAT; we could run supplies from Bangkok if we got the permission; and that certain planes in the plan would have to be run by civilianized USAF personnel.

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In regard to page 1 of the plan, the President asked what the Sino-Soviet arguments were concerning our proposal, what are their ideas on Laos, and why had the Russians leapfrogged the Chinese Communists in this area?

The President asked General Lemnitzer how we can carry this plan out without an escalation on the Soviet part. General Lemnitzer responded that their long line of communications would make it harder for them to escalate in the near future than it would for us if we took this step.

The President then said that he recalled a report the Joint Chiefs had given him which pointed up that if we went at this on a full scale, they could still put five troops to one of ours into the battle, that the defensive would be much easier than the offensive, and that the Joint Chiefs of Staff should keep this early report of theirs in mind.

The President then asked a series of questions on the lack of morale and the lack of leadership, to which General Boyle and Admiral Felt responded. Admiral Felt pointed out that there were fifteen American teams now in Laos; that they were working down to battalion level; and that it was a little hard to work any lower down because they have to save face for the Asians and make it look like they were able to run their own army.

The President then asked General Boyle to give his impression of these troops. General Boyle responded that some battalions fight well, and he knows of one particular battalion, where they have a good commander and some good company commanders, which is as good as any battalion he has ever seen. The President asked again where we can get the officers these people need. General Boyle responded that Phoumi had had a winning team, but he took his best commanders out and put them in regional commands, probably to support him politically and to keep an eye on the forces at his back. One reason given for their change of leaders was that when the families live in the south, the Laotian commanders don't like to fight up north, and so they put in for a southern regional command. General Boyle expressed the fact that most of all, the troops need motivation, so that they could know what they were fighting for.

The President said we had an earlier plan to seize the crossroads and to go on to the PDJ. He asked why they think it would be better now.



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The response was that this was a different situation, and that the Laotians probably could not bring the earlier attack off by themselves, but they could bring this plan off if we all supported it.

Secretary McNamara said that we really did not support the earlier plan like we should have. The Ambassador out there fought the plan, and that plan itself was not as strong as the one they were presenting here. Secretary McNamara added it was essential that Admiral Felt, State Department, Defense Department and the Ambassador all work on the same set of instructions. The President again asked what plans we have after winning. The points were made that the neutral Laos that we were seeking was different than the one we are working for now. The Laos we are fighting for now should be anti-Communist, but neutral -- in other words, keep the Laotian government from strong Communist influence. Before, we sought a pro-Western "neutral" Laos.

The President then said, "Well, look at Vietnam. What kind of a government are we going to get? Couldn't we settle now for a non-Communist Laos?" He also asked if we agree to this plan today, when is the "point of no return" -- when we start all this in motion, how long do we have before we have to go through with it, or call it off? Mr. McNamara and General Lemnitzer responded April 1st, if we started right now, would be the point of no return. Mr. McNamara also said that if we get the equipment and personnel, alert the forces properly, and have a determination of what we are going to do, D-Day could be April 1st. The President then asked for the last time if there is any disagreement around the table, and no one evidenced any.

The senior State Department man then asked what would happen if the attack failed and what we would do then.

General Boyle then asked that even if we lose the PDJ attack plan and do not accomplish our mission, can Phoumi still hold the rest of the country? Would he be sufficiently supported? Or will we have expended all our effort on this attack? Will we back Phoumi up so we can keep the rest of the country under control? Admiral Felt commented that this would be pretty tough because the Pathet Lao are all over the country.

The President then asked the group if there was any partition of Laos that the people around the conference table felt we could agree upon.


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State Department said that if we win this attack situation, we will be back to the 1954 situation and we can work from there. Admiral Felt commented that we were trying to return Laos to the situation that existed when Heintges came in. Mr. Bissell said that if we succeeded we would be back to the Geneva Accord and we would have the Pathet Lao in command in the north and the others in the south.

There followed a lengthy discussion on the use of our maximum bargaining capacity with Phoumi; the fact that we must anticipate that some Americans might be lost in the B-26s and helicopters; that Laos is a political liability as long as we had no French, no British, no New Zealand and no Australian support.

There was a short discussion of our viewpoint for the March 20-30 SEATO conference.

The President said "What if we discuss this problem only with the Thais?" The State Department said that this would be the breakup of SEATO.

The President directed that we have another opportunity to talk this over before launching -- that we would carry on our political efforts -- and for the moment, say that we are gravely concerned. He wanted to make sure that if there is a military offensive in this area, we have some capability of holding things together in Laos.

The President then left the conference, with instructions that they needed to get together and set up a plan of action and get things in orderly priority of activity. This was done at a subsequent conference, and Secretary McNamara pulled together the seventeen courses of action and the assigned responsibility for them.

C. V. CLIFTON